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New Nukes for NATO: A No-Win Idea

By Arthur Macy Cox

IN TWO WEEKS the NATO alliance will decide whether to deploy 464 ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe which have sufficient range to destroy targets in the Soviet Union. This proposal is ill-conceived — not because Soviet President Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Gromyko oppose it, but because it may mark the end of any further arms control agreements and a substantial increase in the possibility of accidental nuclear war. The nuclear weapon package for NATO is directly tied to the SALT II treaty, but it abandons an essential principle of SALT even before the treaty is ratified by the Senate. Ground-launched cruise missiles cannot be monitored by intelligence. If they are deployed, verification of a SALT III agreement will be virtually impossible.

It has long been understood that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would risk arms control agreements based on trust. During the seven years of complex negotiation of SALT II both sides made compromises to enhance verification because they knew that no treaty was possible without insurance against cheating. Perhaps the most controversial issue of the negotiations, from this standpoint, was the control of ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles.

The control of these weapons was so difficult, in fact, that the SALT II treaty merely postpones a final decision. The protocol to the SALT II treaty provides that "each party undertakes not to deploy cruise missiles capable of a range in excess of 600 kilometers [360 miles] on sea-based launchers or on land-based launchers." The 360-mile range limit is important because weapons based in Europe could not reach the Soviet Union at that distance. The protocol, an integral part of the treaty, remains in force until Dec. 31, 1981.

Attached to the SALT II treaty are the agreed "Principles and Basic Guidelines for Subsequent Negotiations" which Presidents Carter and Brezhnev signed in Vienna on June 18. These guidelines call for resolution of the issues included in the protocol in the context of "significant and substantial reductions in the number of strategic offensive arms, including restrictions on the development, testing and deployment of new types of strategic offensive arms and on modernization of existing strategic offensive arms." The intent of this language is clear. Both sides have agreed to cut existing forces, rather than deploy additional weapons.

But the NATO proposal calls for the deployment of 108 Pershing II ballistic missiles.

launched cruise missiles with a range of more than 1,000 miles each to be located in West Germany, Britain, Belgium and Italy. The NATO decision will also include a yet unspecified, but directly linked, proposal to the Soviets to negotiate a reduction of medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe and Western Russia.

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The justification for the new NATO weapons is that the Soviets have been modernizing their medium-range weapons by deploying about 100 mobile SS20 ballistic missiles, each with three warheads and about 90 supersonic Backfire bombers. Neither of these weapons is controlled by SALT II, though Brezhnev in a letter to Carter has made a commitment to limit the deployment of the Backfire to 30 a year with no refueling capacity.

Both sides have had medium-range systems since the 1950s. The United States has forward-based systems capable of reaching the Soviet Union, including bombers located in Britain and on aircraft carriers, as well as Poseidon submarines, carrying almost 500 warheads, which are assigned to the NATO command. Both Britain and France have their own independent nuclear forces capable of hitting Soviet cities. The medium-range nuclear forces have been essentially balanced for years.

However, since the Soviet weapons are more modern it is claimed that they must be matched by NATO.

It might make sense to plan the deployment of the Pershing II, which is a ballistic missile with characteristics somewhat similar to the SS20. It might make sense also to build a new bomber as advanced as the Backfire. But it makes no sense at all to plan to deploy the ground-launched cruise missile.

These weapons are so small, about 18 feet long and two feet wide, that they can be easily hidden, easily moved and easily launched from mobile launchers. Modern intelligence technology has amazing capabilities, but it cannot provide adequate information on the location and numbers of ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles. Adequate verification would be impossible. The deployment of ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles would provoke an unrestrained arms race with no way to put the genie back in the bottle.

U.S. proponents of the cruise missile deployment decision come from opposing camps, making for strange bedfellows indeed. The opponents of arms control and the SALT II treaty see the decision as a possible means to kill the SALT process. They are not concerned about